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A

SERMON,
ON THE DEATH

OF THE

REV. WM. M. ATKINSON, D. D.

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[It is proper to state, that the remains of Dr. ATKINSON were attended to the grave by his intimate friend, the Rev. WILLIAM H. FOOTE, D. D., of Romney, who delivered a Funeral Discourse on the occasion. The Pastor of the Church was absent from home at the time, and preached the following Sermon two weeks after the sad event, upon his return to Winchester. It is published at the request of the friends of the deceased.]

SERMON.

Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.—1 PETER v. 3, 4.

AN All-wise and Merciful God conferred upon man, at his creation, a social and sympathetic nature. With the physical constitution of the body and the intellectual endowments of the mind, he has united the affections and emotions of the heart. Our Creator has made us capable of loving, in order that we may learn to love him, and thus fulfil the great end and purpose of our being. The sensibilities of man's nature furnish him with the capacity for misery or happiness. The emotions of joy and sorrow are felt by all, but with many, those of sorrow predominate. In this world of change and trial, the objects of our love are often taken from us. The tender and strong affections of the heart which cluster and cling around some beloved object, some dear friend, are often broken asunder and torn away by the hand of death. Unlike the bright and blessed clime, where the redeemed dwell with their Saviour—where all is fadeless and enduring—where there are joys laid up which shall remain forever more—*here* sin has entered, and death by sin, and death has passed upon all. Hence we are mourners upon earth. Hence the heart is no stranger to sorrow, nor the eyes to weeping. Hence, my dear hearers, we have this day assembled to pay an humble tribute to departed excellence—to recur to the Christian virtues of a servant of God, one whom he has called to “come up higher”—to dwell with melancholy pleasure upon the amiable and estimable traits of character which distinguished our beloved friend—to invite many here to turn back and review the happy intercourse which they have enjoyed with the faithful and affectionate Pastor, the humble and devoted Christian, the kind and sympathising Friend, the noble-minded and accomplished Gentleman, the loved and lamented WILLIAM M. ATKINSON, whose warm and capacious heart “loved every body, and whom every body loved.”

We, my friends, are not the only mourners upon the occasion of this sad loss. Thousands in every part of our Church and country will

read with eyes rendered dim by emotion the announcement of his death. Some of the great and good have already united their sympathies with the sorrows of his afflicted family. The Church will mourn the loss of a devoted and efficient laborer—the Ministry will long deplore the absence, from their councils, their pulpits, and their homes, of one whom they loved indeed as a *brother*—Society has lost an ornament, and one ever devoted to her best interests—the cultivated and the refined have lost an agreeable companion, and the poor and needy a kind and ready benefactor—the Christian has lost a brother, with whom it was pleasant and profitable to commune—and the impenitent sinner the faithful exhortations and the fervent prayers of a sincere friend. We shall no more on earth behold the noble countenance of our departed friend—no more meet his kind and cordial greeting—no more listen to his earnest and affectionate pleadings for the cause of Christ—no more at the table of our Lord witness the emotions of his overflowing heart, or receive from his hands the emblems of the Saviour's dying love—no more will he stand in this sacred desk—no more occupy his accustomed seat in this house, from which nothing short of imperative necessity ever withheld him. His last visit was made here when the narrow lid confined his earthly remains, and the scene of his former labors was shrouded in mourning.

But how shall I speak of that loss which has been sustained by those who knew him in the nearer and dearer associations of life? who were united to him in the relations, and addressed him by the titles of Brother, Father, Husband? May God, in his infinite mercy, pour into the wounded heart the consolations of his Spirit, and supply abundantly from a heavenly source that which can no longer be derived from an earthly! We rejoice in our sorrow to know that what is our loss is his unspeakable gain. He is not dead! Though we see him no more on earth, his immortal spirit lives in the blissful presence of his Saviour and his God. He has but entered upon the morning of an endless day, the sun of which shall no more go down forever. He has entered upon another and a better state of existence. His soul, being united by faith to Christ, at the moment of death was made perfect in holiness, and did immediately pass into glory, while his mouldering body sleeps in expectation of the Arch-Angel's Trump, when it will be re-united to the pure spirit, and life, an endless life shall be his.

But the truly good man lives even upon earth after the spirit has fled and the body becomes lifeless—lives when the dust has returned to the earth as it was, and the spirit has returned to God who gave it.—The memories of the righteous remain forever. They live in the hearts of surviving friends. They live in the causes and influences which they have set in motion among their fellow men—in the truth they have uttered—the example they have set—the testimony they have

borne—the works they have done. They have thus an immortality upon earth which is parallel with the flight of time, and commensurate with the duration of the world itself.

Let us not forget the solemn admonition which is addressed to us all in this afflictive dispensation of Providence. Let us see and feel the hand of God in this stroke. Let us learn humility, and bow down before the righteous will of our Heavenly Father, knowing that he doth all things well—that although clouds and darkness are round about him, justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne. While we mourn—for it is impossible for such a man to die and not deeply to be deplored—let us remember and realize the fact that he *needs* not our tears nor our sympathies—that he is perfect in holiness and happiness in the mansions of the blessed. Let us all strive to follow our departed friend as he followed Christ—let us contemplate his pure and elevated Christian character—let us dwell upon his virtues, and study to imitate as well as admire and love him.

Two important and comprehensive elements in the character of the Christian minister, are presented in the text. The first is negative in its form, "*Neither as being lords over God's heritage;*" the second positive, "*but being ensamples to the flock.*"

The fourth verse declares what shall be the reward which shall be bestowed by the Saviour upon all who are faithful in his service: "*And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.*" Let us consider and apply to the circumstances of the present occasion, the traits of ministerial character here referred to, in their order; and in the second place, the reward which is to be conferred.

The Apostle Peter, in the closing chapter of his first Epistle, exhorts to a proper discharge of their responsible and sacred duties, the ministers of Christ under the title of "elders." This title is applied in the New Testament to those who labored in word and doctrine, and to those who only exercised authority and control in the affairs of the church. The distinction is made between the "teaching" and the "ruling elders," the "ministers" and the "governments:" but the title of "elder" is applied both to ministers of the gospel and laymen who were officers in the church. The exhortation of the Apostle is enforced by the declaration that he himself was one of them, and so would claim the right of a brother to exhort his brethren. It is also urged that he was a *witness* of the sufferings of Christ, and so had the sanction and authority of Apostleship—that he too had been, with them, a partaker of the Holy Ghost, and possessed the evidence of the Spirit, that he should also partake of the glory which should hereafter be revealed. Thus enforcing and strengthening his appeal, he exhorts them to "feed the flock of God which was among them"—telling them that they "must

take the oversight thereof"—that to this high and holy office God had called them, and that they must perform it; not, however, by "constraint," but "willingly"—not by an arbitrary constraint exercised over the flock, and on their part borne unwillingly; nor under the constraining power of worldly considerations, circumstances, or authority, should the ministry undertake and exercise the office with unwilling hearts.—Thus the flocks receive willingly and joyfully those who would feed and guide them; and the ministry acknowledging the power of the Holy Spirit calling them to the work, and feeling the spiritual pressure inducing them to cry, "Wo is me, if I preach not the gospel," yet delight to do the will of their Saviour, and run with joyful feet in the paths of salvation. In entering upon the sacred work, and in its prosecution, they should be actuated by pure motives. They were especially to beware of two sins, *avarice* and *ambition*. They were not to preach "for filthy lucre," nor were they to assume the position of "lords over God's heritage." In warning them against these sins, the opposite virtues of *benevolence* and *humility* are enjoined.

Avarice is not the ordinary temptation of the ministry in our day and in our country. It does fall, however, with blighting and blasting influence upon some portions of Christendom, where large temporal emoluments are bestowed with certain titles and places in the church. In some ages of the church, this has been the prevailing sin—when heaven and eternal life, together with indulgences to commit all manner of sin against God, were sold by a corrupt priesthood for money. Some even in our own age and in our portion of the church may be subjected to this unholy influence; or if there are no large emoluments to excite cupidity, avarice may relapse into the kindred sin of parsimony. Allow me to make a passing reference here to the deceased. Where was *disinterestedness* more remarkably exhibited than in his character? Whose *benevolence* was ever more uniform or universal than his? By nature he was generous, and when to the natural feeling of generosity was added Christian principle, it became sanctified into *Christian liberality*. All who knew him will bear willing testimony to this; and there are many whom gratitude for benefits received has induced to rise up and call him blessed, and to invoke the blessings and mercies of God upon him and his children. If he escaped the temptation of avarice, he did also of *ambition*. If he preached not for filthy lucre's sake, neither did he attempt to lord it over God's heritage. If he exercised the grace of disinterested benevolence, he did also of gentleness and humility. Ambition has ever been, and ever will, in this sinful world, be a temptation to the gospel minister. The position to which he is called is one of elevated character—he stands forth as the guide and instructor of his fellow men upon the most interesting and most important of all subjects—he is entrusted with much influence over the

conduct and even the consciences of others. In these circumstances, is it strange that weak, fallible man should feel and suffer from the influence of this temptation? It presses, too, with as much force upon the gospel ministers now as at any former period. There are many, it is to be feared, who do not resist it as they should. It not unfrequently exhibits itself in a spirit of rivalry among the brethren—in sensitiveness as to position in the church, and a desire for prominence in ecclesiastical matters. If not controlled and overcome by grace at first, it will increase until it is manifested in a desire to lord it over the church, the heritage of God. When this spirit prevails in the ministry of a church, spiritual despotism will be established and vital piety destroyed.

Our departed brother was called to serve his Lord in almost every department of the church. We believe that all of his many brethren, who were associated with him, would refer to him as a model worthy of imitation in this respect; and those who were connected with him in a sessional capacity, and those over whom his pastoral care extended, would confirm the judgment of his ministerial brethren. Firm and consistent in the discharge of duty, active and ready in every good word and work, prominent in the affairs of the church, where his zeal and qualifications and the voice of his brethren made him prominent—but he sought not to exercise an undue influence, or to wield authority over the heritage of God. The positions in which he was called to serve the church were always regarded by him as opportunities for greater usefulness, and requiring greater faith and activity. He appeared always willing to labor in any service and in any place where he might be the instrument of good. His conduct to his brethren was ever marked with warm-hearted affection and uniform kindness and urbanity of manner. Never inclined to arrogate superiority to himself, even where others were disposed to grant it, he invariably treated with respect and deference the opinions of his brethren. With his disposition and temperament, he would have been less decided and less useful, but for the devotion to *truth* and firm adherence to *principle* which always distinguished him. He never wished to exercise authority for its own sake, and never seemed to desire influence in order to be influential.

The positive direction which the Apostle gives to the brethren, is, that they “should be ensamples to the flock.” What is precept without practice? What is word without action? What is faith without works? What is instruction without example? All dead and powerless. God may honor his truth when proclaimed by the lips of unholy men—he may overrule and sanctify the works of wicked hands; but it is not in accordance with his ordinary dealings. Ordinarily, God qualifies the instruments which he will use in his work. Much importance is attached to this truth in the word of God. Those who bear the vessels of the Lord are required to be clean. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to

be followers of him even as he was of Christ. He also urges Timothy to be an example in word and in conversation. One of the early fathers in the church enjoined upon the younger brethren, "either teach not or teach by living." Our Saviour's command to all is, "Follow me." The office of pastor or shepherd requires him to go before the flock—to lead them in the way—to find out for them the "green pastures beside the still waters"—to go before and call them; and they know his voice and follow him. If dangers are opposing, he must encounter them—if enemies attack the spiritual fold, he must be valiant in the cause of the Lord, and defend those entrusted to his care. Having enforced in his public ministrations some duty to be performed, he must himself be careful to perform it. He must point to heaven and lead the way.—How these duties were discharged by the late pastor of this church, you all can testify. It is best known to you, who were under his pastoral care for seven years, what his Christian deportment was. He was with you in times of difficulty: Did he ever shrink from the discharge of duty? He was with you when pecuniary burdens were upon the church: Did he ever enjoin liberality, and himself refuse to render aid? He was with you when sickness and death entered your dwellings: Did he exhort to the duty of loving and caring for each other, and not himself be present to administer comfort and consolation to the afflicted? While all may love him, I will venture the assertion, that those in this community who have suffered most, love him most. His kindness of manner and his tenderness of feeling rendered him remarkably fitted to administer the consolations of religion to the afflicted. His natural disposition led him to the habitual exercise of charity. His disposition to make allowance for others, and to put the best construction possible upon their conduct, almost amounted to a defect of character; it would no doubt have become a prominent weakness with him, had it not been tempered and regulated by firm principle and Christian truth. He loved and pitied the sinner, but felt no disposition to excuse and palliate the sin. In gentlemanly deportment and uniform courtesy of manner, he was an example to all. He was slow to take offence, and we never knew that he gave offence to any. He was unwilling to believe himself injured by any of his fellow men; and if injured, he was ever ready to forget and forgive it. It is not our wish to appear to go beyond the simple statement of the truth, but to present those traits which were prominent in his character, and in which he certainly excelled. We desire to recall to your minds some of those characteristics of our beloved brother which made him beloved by all who knew him. While we would be sorry to be considered by any as dealing in unqualified panegyric, or approaching the confines of flattery, yet we desire to express with freedom our own sentiments and feelings, and what we believe to be the sentiments and feelings of those who knew him.

Without designing to apply strictly the following passage, we will say that we have never known any one who would better deserve the description given by the Apostle of Christian charity—that universal *love*, which so filled the soul of our departed brother: “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.”

His remarkable amiability of character and gentleness of disposition gave a gentleness and persuasiveness to his preaching, without ever leading him to compromise his orthodoxy, or to keep back any part of the truth. He loved most to preach of Christ, and him crucified—Christ the Redeemer of God’s elect—Christ the Saviour of sinners, and the example and interceding High Priest of the believer. Upon the cultivation and exercise of the Christian affections he loved much to discourse, and no one was more practically acquainted with this important part of true religion.

“He preached the joys of heaven and pains of hell,
And warned the sinner with becoming zeal,
But on eternal mercy loved to dwell;
He taught the gospel rather than the law,
And forced himself to drive, but loved to draw.”

There were some traits which seemed almost contradictory in his character, which were, however, most beautifully regulated and harmonized by the grace of God. To some of these, allusion has already been made. As illustrations, may be mentioned: his unbounded charity, and his firm adherence to principle—his orthodoxy in matters of faith, and his liberality to the views of others—his devoted attachment to his own family and intimate friends, and his love for the whole race of man—his admiration for and devotion to the Presbyterian Church, and his love and liberality for all other Churches of Christ—his mercy, and his justice—his tenderness, and his firmness—his sensibility, and his duty—his faith, and his feelings. These conflicted not with each other, while the abundant measure in which either class existed would seem to suppose some deficiency in the other.

Our limits will only admit a hasty glance at the life and labors of the late Dr. ATKINSON. It is believed he was a native of the town of Petersburg, Va., and was born April 22, 1796. His college studies were pursued at Princeton. In 1822 he made a profession of religion and united himself with the Presbyterian Church, under the pastoral charge of the Rev. B. H. RICE, D. D., whom he regarded as his spiritual father, and for whom he ever entertained the highest veneration and the warmest attachment. About two years after his admission to the

Church, he was ordained an Elder. In this capacity he served the Church with faithfulness and efficiency. His legal attainments and experience made him a useful member of the various church courts which he attended ; and his agreeable manners and cordial love of the brethren made him always welcome to the meetings of those bodies.— While a layman, he was remarkable for his enlarged and liberal views in reference to all the affairs of the Church, and was ever an able advocate and an active friend of all the great benevolent objects of the day. After having remained for more than ten years in the practice of the legal profession, he determined to devote the remainder of his life to the work of the gospel ministry. It must have been from a profound sense of duty, and an earnest desire to give himself wholly to the work of the Lord, that he was induced, at near forty years of age, with a large family of young children, to give up a lucrative profession and enter the ministry. Shortly after his licensure, he accepted an agency for the Bible Society in the State of Virginia. He was the most universally acceptable and the most successful agent the Society has ever appointed for this field. In the year 1838, he accepted a call to the Presbyterian Church in Winchester. Here he labored faithfully and affectionately as pastor of the Church for about seven years, when he was again induced to enter upon the labors of an extended agency.— For more than two years he labored zealously as the agent of the Assembly's Board of Education for the Southern and Western States. Early in the summer of last year, his hitherto vigorous constitution evinced symptoms of decline. For several months he struggled hard against the insidious approaches of disease, until, finding his health materially impaired, he resigned his agency. During the fall and winter, for the most part, he was confined to his house, but did not consider himself in much immediate danger. At every promise of restoration to health, with his characteristic zeal and activity he would project some new plan of labor. He had already made arrangements to act for some months as an agent for Oglethorpe University, in the bounds of the Synod of Georgia ; and just when he was about to exchange the scenes of earthly labor for the saint's everlasting rest, at a meeting of the Virginia Colonization Society he was appointed its agent for the State. His plans and those of the people of God were all disappointed. God had a better plan : His will be done !

He suffered much during his illness from the disease of the stomach, which proved fatal. All the vital organs were disordered and deranged from sympathetic action, and there was much prostration of the entire system. He did not certainly anticipate death until a few days before his decease ; but he often spoke of it as probable, and always with the most perfect calmness and resignation to his Father's will. Ardently attached to his family—several of his children being quite young, and

some in infancy—his feelings of paternal tenderness and solicitude would have been overwhelming, but for the triumph of *faith*. *Perfect resignation* was the grace bestowed on him in that trying hour. He was not even heard to express a *wish* to live. “*Thy will be done!*” was in his heart and on his lips. Shortly before he died, he said to those near him: “I cannot better express the foundation of my hopes, than in that old expression of the faith of God’s people—CHRIST, HIS CROSS AND COVENANT.” When he felt the chill of death stealing over him, he quietly folded his hands upon his breast, closed his eyes, and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” He spoke not again, and in a few moments he was asleep in Jesus. “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord!” While an undue importance may be given to the exercises and expressions of men in their dying hours, still a very great value justly belongs to them. A triumphant death is the appropriate close of the Christian’s conflict. It gives additional testimony to the evidence of a holy life. Dying grace is a special gift of God, and a mark of his favor. It is the proper object of prayer. “May I die the death of the righteous, and may my last end be like his!”

Let us turn from the chamber of death to the mansions of glory—from the body which remains for a time on earth, to the spirit in its flight to heaven. Let us consider the reward which is promised to the faithful servant of God. “And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.” It is a blessed truth that Christ himself shall distribute the rewards and blessings of heaven. How much more precious, then, does the reward become! What additional value and importance are conferred upon it! Do we prize the gifts of the noble and the great among the sons of men? Here is the Sovereign of the Universe dispensing the tokens of his love.—Angel and arch-angel, cherubim and seraphim, bow down before him and do him honor. He has all power, and glory, and dominion, forever and ever—he created all things, and by him all things consist—he is the sole arbiter of the eternal destinies of all his creatures. Such an Almighty King will condescend to bestow the gifts of heaven upon his redeemed children. Infinite condescension! wonderful love!

How differently do we regard the gift of the stranger and the gift of the dear friend. The one may be soon forgotten; it represents but a freak of fancy or a pleasant hour. But it is far different with the memento of love, the gift of friendship, the pledge of affection. A thousand fond remembrances are recalled by it. The gift may in itself be worthless, but love has invested it with a value and clothed it in a beauty which far surpass all the treasures of wealth or the wonders of art. We love the gift, because we love the giver. So it is with Christ. He is emphatically our friend, our best and truest friend, who loved us and gave himself for us. How these heavenly gifts, bestowed by the

Saviour, will remind us of his former love—will bring to our minds all the exhibitions of his love which Christ has made to us, numerous as they are, during our pilgrimage on earth. What if we had a friend who would even dare to die for us—who did actually brave and endure the terrors of death for us, and at the place of his execution gave some token of his love—how we would prize it! Every gift conferred in heaven will be a memento of Calvary—all will refer to the sufferings our blessed Lord endured for us. O! the blessedness to receive from the hand of our dear Redeemer the crown of glory—a precious gift so full of sacred meaning!

Another thing mentioned in the text is, that Christ will assume the same character on that day with his servants. They will appear as pastors, shepherds—he as the chief Shepherd. There will be a resemblance between Christ and his saints. “For we shall be like him, and we shall see him as he is.” The time referred to, “when the chief Shepherd shall appear,” seems to be the Day of Judgment, after the reunion of the bodies and spirits of believers, when they shall enter upon the full and final fruition of eternal blessedness. But the import of this expression extends from the moment of the believer’s death, when he enters into glory, on to the great coronation day of heaven, when the Saviour shall first be crowned, and then shall his redeemed people be crowned together with him, and partake in the triumphs of that glorious day. “One day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” But what is the gift to be conferred? “Ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.” A *crown* is the emblem of sovereignty, and we are made kings and priests unto God. It will confer high honors upon us. It will determine our position in the celestial ranks of shining spirits. It will be a mark of distinction which will turn upon us the admiring gaze of angels, who will look upon us as the most wonderful of all the works of the power and grace of God. A crown is the emblem of triumph—and we are conquerors and more than conquerors through him that loved us and gave himself for us. We will then have gained a complete victory over all our enemies. Death and the grave are passed, sin has been destroyed, Satan baffled, and a mighty triumph won.

The crown shall be a glorious crown—“a crown of glory.” Not the false glory of this world, which is dazzling but deceptive, the false light of which lures so many to destruction, but the glory which shall beam from the heavenly crown will be a holy radiance, a pure and blessed light. They will receive their brightness, as they do their value, from the source of all glory and all perfection. There is no deception there. Much that fascinates on earth is false and dangerous. The gifts of power and honor and earthly glory are usually destructive to those upon whom they are bestowed. But the crown of glory purchased by

the Redeemer will never injure those upon whom he confers it. It will never produce unholy feelings in the possessor, or excite unhallowed envy in the beholder. That which makes these crowns so glorious is, the honor is all derived from Christ. They are the free and undeserved gifts of the Saviour's hand. The blood-washed host of the redeemed will ever rejoice to cast their crowns at his feet, and ever declare, with mingled joy and love, "Not unto us, not unto us, but to thy great name!"

All earthly honors are fleeting and fading in their nature. The crowns which rest on the brows of royalty soon fall to the ground, or are rudely torn off by the hand of violence. The head which wears it throbs with pain, or bows down from weakness, and soon sinks to the grave and is forgotten in its dust. The warrior is crowned in honor of his victories, but the wreath of his triumph soon withers on the brow. For the very emblem of his earthly triumph, man, as if in derision of himself, has selected the frail and fading leaf plucked from its parent stem, soon to wither and to die. In striking contrast with all upon earth, the crowns of heaven fade not away. "When the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that *fadeth not away*." It is fadeless and enduring. It changes not with the flight of time or the endless duration of eternity—its lustre never decaying, its brightness never becoming dim. The crowns shall forever be bright—the palms of victory shall forever be green, and shall forever bloom in amaranthine beauty in the Paradise of God.

Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift! Thanks be to God for the glorious gifts bestowed with the Saviour: The crown of glory, the palm of victory, the inheritance which is incorruptible and fadeless, the blessedness of communion with our God! For all those things which constitute heaven: Mount Zion the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, the innumerable company of angels, the general assembly of the Church of the First Born which are written in heaven, and God the Judge of all, and the spirits of just men made perfect, and Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and the blood of sprinkling, and all that eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive.

O the consolation to believe that our beloved friend and brother is now in the possession of all these—an inhabitant of the bright climes of glory—that he has met his Saviour—that he has received the welcome—that he has got his crown—that he has entered into the rest which remains for the people of God, where the sun shall be no more his light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto him, but the Lord shall be unto him an everlasting light, and his God his glory. His sun shall no more go down, neither shall his moon withdraw itself, for the Lord shall be his everlasting light, and the days of his mourning shall be ended.